

Claire M. Holdsworth, 'Hauntologies: The Ghost, Voice and the Gallery', Close-Up, April 2013

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Hauntologies: The Ghost, Voice and the Gallery

By Claire M. Holdsworth



Seven Songs for Malcolm X, 1993

Ghosts, spectres, poetics and haunting are themes that weave through the sights and sounds of John Akomfrah's moving-image and artistic practice. Throughout his career spanning art, film and television as part of The Black Audio Film Collective[1] in the 1980s and 1990s and in recent solo cinematic and artistic projects, he returns to fictional futures and constructed pasts. The title of the BAFC's 2007 retrospective exhibition *The Ghosts of Songs* reiterates and ensures ghostly dialogue about their work, whilst also referencing their use of sound and song.[2] Songs represent a past phase in history, when they existed as aural-story-singing before modern methods of writing and narrating narrative developed. Akomfrah's work returns an aural dynamic to the situation of history. In works such as *Handsworth Songs* (1986), *Seven Songs for Malcolm X* (1993) and *The Nine Muses* (2010) spectral, barely perceptible traces of character, narrative, sound, song and story are invoked. In these works dense sight-sound collage acts as a medium between the perceptible and excluded, past and present.

The pluralised "ghosts" of songs relate to the pluralised haunting in Hauntologies, Akomfrah's recent solo exhibition, held at Carroll / Fletcher in autumn 2012.[3] In this exhibition Akomfrah continually shifts the location from which we perceive, the perspective we assume in doing so, and the methods we use to look back. In film, video and television sound infers the locations and spaces of its content. Sound can be relative to characters, the camera or any number of constructions, and we cope, we submit and play-along with the spatial narrative inferred. The significant "here" of watching is often deferred or neglected by the internal narrative's concentrated aural "gaze". The monitor speaks from itself to us, the projector blasts sound from one location, or multiple speaker locations, as it throws the image away. In the gallery, the when of watching now is combined with the past, as we watch images and hear sounds captured "then".

Ghost(s) in the Gallery

The sense of space that the word "haunt" connotes is interesting when we consider the physical curation and display of Akomfrah's Hauntologies. People have their haunts, those places they revisit and frequent. A haunting occurs through repetitive manifestation in a particular location such as "the haunted house", where the ghosts inhabit a location. In the gallery moving-sound-images are replayed – they loop and repeat. Etymologically "haunt" relates to the "home" and to the journey or process of journeying to the village or dwelling place.[4] This notion of "the way home" and the journey reflects Akomfrah's recurring thematic explorations of narratives relating to the African diaspora in Europe.

In Hauntologies Akomfrah is referencing a pluralised consideration of the critical notion of "hauntology". It is the nature of the ghost and the situation of being haunted that frames and forms this term. Hauntology is itself a notion with many permutations, from the phantasmagoria, the uncanny and Jacques Derrida to more recent writing on sonic theories and music. Articles and blog posts online overflow with complaints about the vagueness of, or lack of definition associated with this term.^[5] As a term hauntology dissects language relating to ghosts, the situation of being haunted, and the implications these have upon our understanding of the past in the present.

The Record and Recording

As Akomfrah outlines in the exhibition catalogue, the notion of hauntology gained conceptual capital in the work of Derrida. In 1993 Derrida gave a lecture entitled *Spectres of Marx*. In this lecture he explored the legacy of communism after the fall of the iron curtain in 1989. He considers this political and historical legacy in Europe, using the language and situation of the ghost.^[6] Derrida's discussion of the ghost can, however, be traced further backwards to an interview he gave in Ken McMullen's *Ghost Dance* (1983). Derrida's discussion in this interview on "The Science of Ghosts" is as apposite as in his later critical constructions in *Spectres of Marx*.^[7] The narrative of self one creates, and that is created, by sound and image recording is an important and significant topic in his discussion. The formulation of hauntology Derrida reveals in this film is one that concerns the recorded-sound-image, and the conception of self and temporality that recording creates.

Akomfrah, in an interview published in the Hauntologies exhibition publication^[8], observes that Derrida "was gripped by the idea of ghosting, of how the other invades and structures the self" (Akomfrah, 2012: 3). In the gallery artworks invade each other. The perception of one inherently involves the experience of another, as sounds bleed, light spills, and the walls echo and deflect the artwork back upon itself and other artworks in its vicinity. Mark Fisher has written extensively about hauntology and sonic hauntology. He dissects what the ghost is, and how its spectral manifestation functions. He observes that "spectres are unsettling because they are that which cannot, by their very nature (or lack of nature), ever be fully seen; gaps in Being, they can only dwell at the periphery of the sensible, in glimmers, shimmers, suggestions" (Mark Fisher in *Hauntology Now*, 2006). It is at this periphery of the sensible that Akomfrah excavates narratives, calling attention to stories obscured by the process of telling, and the selectivity of this process. It is also "at the periphery of the sensible" that artworks effect and interact in the gallery, at the edges of sensory perception.

In *Ghost Dance* Derrida animatedly explores his own spectral quality as a recorded interviewee – a participant in the spectral pageant of film. He outlines that while some people believe ghosts are part of the past, he thinks differently: "I believe that ghosts are part of the future... the modern technology of images... like cinema... enhances the power of ghosts and their ability to haunt us" (Derrida in *Ghost Dance*, 1983). For Derrida "the technology of images" affects our behaviour and perception of temporality. Derrida's dialogue in *Ghost Dance* outlines that it is his perception of his future spectral replay on screen that determines how he behaves on camera.^[9] He speaks from the location of the anticipated replay that the viewer watches. He inhabits / is inhabited by the replay as opposed to the moment captured when the tape records. Hauntology is here not only concerned with the past's manifestation and presentation in the present, but in how the present will become the past in the future.



The Call of Mist – Redux, 2012

The process of representation and record is explored in Akomfrah's *Peripeteia* (2012). This work uses on-screen text, photos, close-ups of paintings and footage of a man and woman to create a historical collage, mimicking the documents that create historical narrative. The text discusses two portraits painted in the 16th century by German artist Albrecht Dürer, one depicting a black man the other a black woman. We are shown images of these portraits. The footage of the journeying man and woman is merged with close-ups of other paintings depicting seeming black characters, and orientalist photographs of black tribes-people in the staged poses of the past. The writing on screen says that the story of Dürer's sitters is "lost to the winds of history". There is no information other than the name "Katarina" and the existence of these portraits. The viewer knows that the man and woman we see wondering through the moors and landscape are somehow related to these portraits, but also that they are not them. This is an artificial, staged and posed depiction similar to the images in the merged paintings and photographs. These characters on screen do not represent themselves; they are represented and depicted by others. The different visual sources of photos, pictures and filmed-footage provide an incomplete narrative, exposing the gaps in European art historical depiction and representation of black people. The characters in *Peripeteia* are possessed and inhabited by a narrative and other that is not their own.

Derrida's dialogue in *Ghost Dance*, and the silent and easily manipulated visual images in *Peripeteia* highlight a particularly disturbing situation of recording, and the capture of "self" recording enacts. Ian Penman discusses the situation of capture the recorded voice produces in his essay *On the Mic: How Amplification Changed the Voice for Good*. In this essay he explores what he calls "microphonics", describing it as a "new phantom science".

Recording projects the voice into a nowhere future, where it can listen back, say 'that's not quite right' [...] Far from truthful, the microphone can record lies, doubts, concealments, allowing manipulative 'takes' of the voice from which a certain tone can be synthesized in the studio console. Thus, the presumed truth of the voice [...] cannot be thought of as immutable, as the voice is always now – via recording – at a remote from itself, (Penman in Young, 2007: 26)

Here, Penman articulates the trauma of the dissociated voice. Recording projects the unchanging voice forward, creating a paradoxical temporality. The voice is trapped in the now whilst inhabiting a "nowhere future". The separation of self from voice in recording, and self from image in filming, is an inherently spectral process, where what is recorded is neither the original, nor a truthful representation of it. Derrida articulates this in his desire to acknowledge the artificial situation of filming in *Ghost Dance*. Trauma arises from the impossibility of changing the recorded, the separation from source it enacts, and the unnatural, unchanging temporality of its capture.

The present in *Peripeteia* is undefined, and pulled out of timeline and context. The sound of wind engulfs, calms and brings us to the timeless moors, mimicking the wind of history. The rustic clothing of the man with his cloak, and the girl with her white-cloth-bonnet call back through time to an indefinable pre-20th century context. Derrida observed: "Haunting is historical, to be sure, but it is not dated, it is never docilely given a date in the chain of presents, day after day, according to the instituted order of the calendar" (Derrida, 1994: 3). Hauntology is about breaking down chronological

perception. The ghost's re-manifestation is about a sense of the past – the historical – that functions outside linear narrative. In *Peripeteia* the ethereal, impossibility, and the intangibility of the elemental wind mimics the intangibility of the people and narratives we see. We know this secondary "portrait" is imagined and staged. The images of Dürer's portraits call backward to an unknowable context, where the journeying characters depicted on screen call forward, inhabiting the now of the film and its potential future replay. Akomfrah is not looking at hauntology. He is looking at pluralised hauntologies. He is considering the many versions and representations of the past in the present, in numerous images and sources, as opposed to the singularity of linear narrative and depiction.

Voice, Ghost and Separation

The Call of Mist – Redux (2012) was shown in a subterranean room downstairs at Hauntologies. In this piece we hear the disembodied voices recorded on an answering machine. The figure of a man is seen alongside images of mountains, lochs and landscape, a car, roadsides and phone boxes. We see a lonely answering machine in an urban flat, whilst the sounds of voices from news and media, and messages seemingly recorded on the machine stitch together story, and infer narrative context. From the combined sound and image the viewer infers that the messages we hear are being picked-up at these phone-boxes, as the man journeys through this location. The messages tell us things. We infer that the journeying man owns this machine, and that his mother has died. It is the voice that controls narrative in this piece. The paradoxical temporality of the recorded voice discussed by Penman, is encapsulated by the voices we hear in this work. The answering machine functions as a time capsule, an archive preserving disembodied voices: The ghosts of a past time. The machine is a medium, channelling narrative, voice and past-time into the present.

Penman's discussion of the trauma and lack of truth associated with the recorded voice reflects our uncanny obsession with the disembodied voice in ghost stories and horror films. The disembodied ghost voice has been separated, physically, from its original body. Steven Connor discusses the separation that occurs between voice and self when we speak: "I must participate in my voice only by coming apart from it; indeed, it is only because I am always apart from my voice that such participation is possible" (Connor, 2000: 5). The voice is inherently separated from body, and from real-time. It exists only after the moment of utterance. The voice leaves us, and once it is uttered it cannot be taken back or changed. A ghost's body – the physical anchor to present moment – no longer exists. It is dead and gone. In *Ghost Dance* Derrida is asked whether he believes in ghosts. He replies: "You are asking a ghost whether he believes in ghosts; Because he is being filmed... instead of playing myself... without knowing it... I let a ghost ventriloquise my words or play my role" (Derrida in *Ghost Dance*, 1983). Mladen Dolar similarly observes that the voice is in a "most peculiar paradoxical position" of separation, as it is "the simultaneous inclusion/exclusion which retains the excluded at its core" and is constantly haunted "by the impossibility of symbolising itself" (Dolar, 2006: 106). Just as the voice is without a body and bares this uncanny trace, so is the ghost separated from its former self, physically and temporally. It is both associated with and excluded from self in a way that parallels the recorded, machine mediated moving-sound image.



The Last Angel of History, 1995

In the gallery sounds meet, they mingle, they disturb and bother, at times roaming, at times hanging

in the air, only to dis- and re-appear. In this setting, the sounds and images in the last encountered work reverberate in your ears as you encounter one in the present, and the possible future encounter with the next is anticipated as you imagine and identify sounds from different sources. This locational sensory overlap of sound, and separation of voice from body are conflicting sonic situations, reminiscent of J.G. Ballard's short story 'The Sound-Sweep'. The porous walls of the gallery echo the atmosphere of the science-fictional future depicted in this story. In this future, technology and sonic fashions have advanced people's senses to the point that physical reverberations of sounds trapped and echoing within walls and buildings can be detected. The walls of this world are continually absorbing, and every room is a whispering gallery. Location becomes a hard-drive, an external record of actions long past. The mute sound-sweep Mangon discreetly vacuums this intolerable cacophony with his "sonovac" and transports the detritus to the sound-dump. In this story sounds are unchangeable – no word can be erased or forgotten whether in the sound-dump or the location of occurrence. Once something is recorded it can never be changed. It can never be taken back, and we loose control. In the gallery we relinquish control. We are rarely allowed to change the volume, switch things off, move things around or interfere with this environment.

The machine-mediated voiceovers in *The Call of Mist*, and the sound detritus that Mangon sweeps is "acousmatic" sound. The acousmatic is a mode of listening originally discussed by Pierre Schaeffer. It describes the experience of listening to sounds in themselves, such as those of radio, dissociated from visual context.[10] In the sound installation *At the Graveside of Tarkovsky* (2012) – made in collaboration with Trevor Mathison – voices, sounds and music are pulled from Tarkovsky films. These sounds haunted the lower gallery at Hauntologies, filling the eerie, dark, gravelled basement. The message-voices in *The Call of Mist* are also acousmatic presences without visualised body. They are disconnected and separated from image whilst simultaneously invading and being possessed by/trapped within the visualised answering machine. These voices are also trapped within another machine: The headphones necessary for listening. The narrative in *The Call of Mist* is one in which neither sound nor image can be discarded or disregarded, yet curitorially they are separated, as the acousmatic voices and soundscape are trapped inside the headphones. The narrative is communicated only through their simultaneous combination when replayed. In this piece sound and image enact a hauntological process of dissociation, invasion and possession, as each manifests and inhabits the other: The ghost(s) in the machine.

Replay and Return

In the separate tracks of *Psyche* (2012) sounds mesh, overlap and undermine each other. The cuts and coloured screens of this three-monitor installation invade and overlap as images repeat and contrast. The monitors multiply and call attention to the material of which they are composed. Sound and image from costume dramas are cut-up and collaged on each screen. The dramas cited included Brownlow and Mollo's *Winstanley* (1975), Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928) and Straub-Huillet's *The Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach* (1968). These works re-enact a past time, observable in the costumes that pre-date the technology of record and replay. The works inhabit an observable and audible time different to the moment of replay we watch. Each of the numerous sound-image drama citations bare technological hallmarks, such as black and white images, image grain or sound static. These technological hallmarks call back to the moment of recording, when the original dramas were shot. Each source calls back to and cites a time other than the moment of record, depicting peripeteic historical moments. The cacophonous layering of sound within each track overlaps, confuses and changes the meaning of these re-edited and re-played staged scenes. The clips in each are separated and cut from source whilst invading one another as the monitors play.

A recording is replayed; it functions in contrast to linear chronology, inhabiting through presence. It changes meaning with each manifestation and replay, each pitch forward into a different moment. Derrida observes that the ghost is "Repetition and first time, but also repetition and last time, since the singularity of any first time also makes it [...] also the last time" (Derrida, 1994: 10). This return, and paradoxical situation of the ghost's return, upsets linear narrative.[11] In the dense sight sound collages of Akomfrah's practice he alerts us to the editorial process, the selectivity of the record, or that which has been deliberately recorded. He also reveals the uncertain temporality, and uncertain truth inherent in any representation of the past. The photos, portraits and painting in *Peripeteia* bare observable links to the past in their style and appearance. The replayed images in *Psyche* bare the hallmarks of the past in dated costumes, and mixed technological aesthetics. *The Call of Mist* traps the voice in near obsolete technology; the only way to capture and preserve past sound, and narrate past events. These works contain references to the "technologies" of recording history, such as drawing, painting, sound capture and obsolete camera techniques – technologies of representation.

In these references to the methods and means with which we record and archive, Akomfrah highlights the process of interpretation that occurs when we encounter the record, and how each manifestation, each technological rendering of the past is at once a repeat, and in a unique situation of interpretation.

Haunting and History

In the gallery works exist in space, we move between them. In this setting we externally experience sound and image beyond what is portrayed and mixed on screens or inside monitors. The complex juxtapositions of sound, source, image and archive that have become the hallmarks of Akomfrah's internal works are here experienced externally. The moving-sound-images haunt in their repeated manifestation through screens and speakers, and call back to sources beyond this present, beyond this particular artwork. Moving-sound-images are pre-recorded. They do not belong to this immediate present. The songs and story change as they are sung, ghosts of their original selves, separated from body, separated from narrative, truth and history, they manifest differently with each return; fictional pasts inhabiting a constructed future, or a constructed exhibition. In Akomfrah's work we become aware of the gaps. We think about what was not recorded, and what is not being said. This trauma of the dissociated narrative parallels the uncanny and unnatural voice separated from the self, and the gaps created as we select and narrate history. Just as the voice is always separated from body, so too is recorded time and historical narrative always separated from truth and context, it returns as ghosts of itself, manifesting anew with each retelling, re-contextualisation and each re-play.

Endnotes

- [1] The Black Audio Film Collective (1982-1998) John Akomfrah, Reece Augustine, Edward George, Lina Gopaul, Avril Johnson, Trevor Mathison and Clare Johnson (replaced in 1985 by David Lawson).
- [2] Exhibition *The Ghost of Songs: The Film Art of the Black Audio Film Collective 1982-1998* took place at FACT, Liverpool (2 February to 1 April 2007), The Arnolfini, Bristol (27 April to 22 June 2007), INIVA and The Whitechapel Gallery, London (28 May to 3 August 2008) curated by the Otolith Group in partnership with FACT.
- [3] *Hauntologies* took place at Carroll / Fletcher, London between 5 October and 8 November 2012. Full exhibition details and downloads can be accessed at: www.carrollfletcher.com.
- [4] Mark Fisher also discusses the home and the etymological connotations of "haunt" in section 7 of his k-punk blog post *Home is where the haunt is: The Shinning's Hauntology*.
- [5] This is observed and exemplified in the comments following Andrew Gallix's Guardian Books blog post *Hauntology: A not-so-new critical manifestation* (17 June 2011).
- [6] Derrida presented his lecture *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning & the New International* at the conference Whither Marxism? Global Crises in International Perspective, organised and managed by the Center for Ideas and Society, University of California, Riverside (22 – 24 April 1993). This lecture was subsequently published in English in 1994.
- [7] Derrida's discussion of "The Science of Ghosts" comprises chapter 3 of the 2006 DVD release of *Ghost Dance* by Mediabox Limited. Ken McMullen also wrote about ghosting and revenants in his article *Back from the Future* in Vertigo Volume 1, Issue 5, Autumn-Winter 1995.
- [8] The interview with John Akomfrah on *Hauntologies* was conducted by Barbara Rodriguez Munoz for the exhibition publication. This publication can be downloaded online at: <http://www.carrollfletcher.com/exhibitions/12/overview/> (7 January 2013).
- [9] Derrida also discusses the artificiality of being recorded in his interviews in Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering Kofman's documentary *Derrida* (2002).
- [10] Schaeffer discusses "the acousmatic" in his essay *Acousmatics*, originally published in 1966.
- [11] Fisher also discusses the paradoxical situation of the ghost's return at the beginning of his blog post *Hauntology Now*, on k-punk.

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Claire M. Holdsworth is an archivist and exhibition coordinator currently conducting PhD research at Central Saint Martins, University of the Arts London. Her research encompasses artists' moving-image in the 1980s, and sound perception and analysis in relation to historiography. Click here to visit her Central Saint Martins page.